

Thoughts on Classroom Inclusion and Mask Policy during Covid-19

[VIDEO DESCRIPTION]

A Black, Indigenous woman is signing. She has glasses, brown eyes, and curly dark brown hair. She is seated in her living room. Behind is a white wall with a few pictures hanging, and a grey couch.

[TRANSCRIPT]

Hello, everyone. My name is Sarah Sarchet. This is my sign name. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I teach biology in the NTID Science & Mathematics department.

Classes will soon be starting. We're all thinking about how we can keep our classrooms safe. One big concern is about the mask policy, especially as it relates to students who are BIPOC. BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and POC or people of color. I am a Black and Indigenous woman myself, and I would like to share my thoughts and ideas about how we as faculty can teach in a culturally responsive way. I also want to discuss how we can demonstrate RIT's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Please note and please understand, this video is not meant to interpret or replace and of RIT's official policies. These are my own, Sarah's own thoughts.

Being Proactive vs. Reactive and Social Norming

There are two major approaches: being proactive, and being reactive. Yes, it is true, if a student comes to class with no mask, we have to be ready for that situation. But the best way to be ready is to be proactive. So how exactly can we be proactive? There's something called "social norming". RIT has already done some social norming. How? RIT is using social media. RIT has been showing pictures of the tiger mascot with a mask on. RIT also took many photographs during Move-In Day. Everyone in those pictures has a mask on. When people look and RIT's social media accounts, and look at those pictures, they realize and understand that RIT is, in fact, a place where everyone wears masks.

5 Proactive Ways to Implement Masks as a Social Norm

Now, I would like to share 5 ideas for making masks a social norm in our classrooms.

1. Firstly, we can record a greeting. We can record ourselves greeting the students, and we can say: "Hello! Welcome to RIT. I'm really excited to meet all of you!" We can discuss our expectations, our hopes for the semester, and explain our mask policies in that recorded greeting.
2. Secondly, we can have a live "meet & greet." We can have a virtual office hours to meet and greet the students either before classes start, or soon after classes happen. We should ask the students to join us, and use that time to connect and build rapport with the students. We can use that to foster and encourage social norms. That's also a good time to address and discuss any mask concerns students have.

3. Third, make it visual. We can clarify the benefits of using a mask by showing pictures and videos. For example, you can show a picture that looks like this. Showing pictures and using percentages can help to clarify things. We could say to our students, "Which would you prefer to have on an exam: 50%, 75%, or 97.5%?" Most of our students would typically want a 97.5%. So we can say to them, "Using a mask in the classroom helps us to get close to that 97% safety. So that's why masks have benefits." We can use that kind of explanation, or we could show video that looks like this. You could record yourself at home striking a match and blowing it out or you could just find a video on Youtube.
4. Fourth, whether your class is in person or online, you can still ask your students why they may hesitate, or be unsure about wearing a mask, or why they may not want to wear a mask. It is possible that some of our students don't understand the benefits of wearing a mask; some may feel some level of fear; some of our students may have seen inaccurate or incorrect information on social media; or even read information and misunderstood it. The key thing for us as faculty, is to draw out our students' feelings. Drawing them out, recognizing those feelings, and empathizing with our students, their feelings, their fears, that is what is really important for building rapport with students.
5. Fifth, make sure that your syllabus is clear, and also includes RIT's official mask policy, as well as your expectations - - the expectations that you and everyone in the class will follow. If you do plan to call Public Safety, my advice to you is make it abundantly clear in your syllabus, and discuss it on the first day. Make sure students understand that before it happens. Our students deserve to have clarification and they need to know the consequences of a situation like this. My recommendation is to make a clear, bulleted list of your action steps, and include this in your syllabus.

Cultural Considerations for International and Domestic Students

I had a sit down discussion with Thomastine Sarchet. This is her sign name. Thomastine is the Director of the Center for International Educational Outreach (CIEO). She informed me that we have to think about and consider how international students and domestic students may perceive RIT's mask policy. Thomastine reminded me of two very important things:

1. Firstly, many of our international students may be coming from countries where the mask policy was enforced very strictly; and it is possible that our international students' home countries may in fact be more strict with a mask policy than even the United States.
2. Secondly, many of our international students have something that's called the "collective identity". This means that what is good for everyone and benefits all, and what an individual may desire, could in fact be in conflict. But students with the collective identity will typically choose what benefits all. So that means our international students and our domestic students may in fact have some conflict. It's possible that an international student may look at a U.S. student, and be curious as to why the U.S. student does not wear a mask. We as faculty have to be ready for conflict that could possibly arise. And this conflict could be between two international students; it could be between two domestic students; or it could be between an international student and a student from the U.S. The point is that we have to consider how we would address that situation before it arises.

3 Ways to Demonstrate RIT's Commitment to Diversity & Inclusion

Now would like to share three good cultural practices for the classroom.

1. First, names. It is really important for us to know how to spell our students' names accurately, and even more so to learn to do it quickly. It's even better if we learn our students' sign names. Correctly spelling our students' names demonstrates a great deal of respect. This is especially critical for the names of students that you have never seen before. Secondly, pronouns.
2. When you introduce yourself, please add your pronouns. If you have not already, now would be a good time to change your e-mail signature to include your pronouns. On the first day of class, include a slide that looks like this. It's definitely a good idea to share your pronouns. As for students, leave the decision to them. Some students may want to share their pronouns, and other students may not yet feel safe. Either way, sharing your pronouns creates a classroom environment, and a classroom culture, a classroom norm where pronouns matter and identities matter.
3. Third, doing a land acknowledgment. That means taking the time to recognize and honor the Indigenous people who lived, worked, and took care of the land that RIT is on. It's a very good practice to do that on the first day of class. It's not necessary to do it every day of class, but it is important on the first day. The RIT Native Americans Future Stewards Program has on their website a statement of a land acknowledgment that you can borrow and use. I encourage you to post it on the MyCourses announcements, and also include it in your lecture slides on the first day. In summary, this makes a welcoming environment for our Indigenous students.

Finally, I would like to offer myself as a resource for all of you. I am the vice chair of the NTID Diversity Group, NDG. Issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are near and dear to my heart. If any of you have questions, you're curious, you need more ideas on how to make your classroom more inclusive, you are welcomed and encouraged to contact me at any time.

Closing Thoughts and Resources

Two more awesome resources for you. Firstly our own Dr. Alesia Allen. She is the Director of the NTID Diversity & Inclusion Office. Secondly, Dr. Taj Smith, who is the Director of Diversity Education at RIT. Both of them are ready, willing, and able to help you answer any questions that you have. Best of luck to all of you. Stay healthy. Stay safe.